

Bishop Lee, members of the Edmund Rice family and network,

It is a great pleasure to be with you here in Waterford for this opening of the Edmund Rice Summer School. Your reflections take on a particular significance this year, set as they are in the context of the celebrations of the 250th Anniversary of the birth of this remarkable Christian witness and outstanding Irishman, Blessed Edmund Ignatius Rice.

The theme you have chosen for your Summer School is both timely and ambitious: 'Edmund Rice Today: what is being born?' The title suggests that what you are celebrating is not just an historic event 250 years ago but a memory, and gift to the Church, that is still very much alive today. When God gives a gift to the Church in the founder of a Religious Congregation, it is seldom for that person or for their time alone. That is why the Second Vatican Council, and more recently the Apostolic Visitation to Ireland, placed much emphasis on returning to the example of the founders in the renewal of Religious Life.

In Blessed Edmund Ignatius Rice we have the founder of two Religious Congregations - the Christian Brothers and the Presentation Brothers. His influence extends through these two international Orders of consecrated men to a wider family of past-pupils and, more recently, to the international Edmund Rice network. Far from the picture of decline so often presented, the work and growing membership of this network reflects a dynamic enterprise that is not only alive, but also very much needed and valued in the Church today. So many aspects of this work are on display here today. So, in the midst of your celebrations, at the heart of the question you have set yourself – what is being born today – you have many reasons to be joyful and to look to the future with hope.

Blessed Edmund used to say: 'Providence is our inheritance'. We can be certain that what is being born today will not only be rooted in the original gift to the Church of the life and mission of Edmund Ignatius Rice, it will also be the fruit of God's providence. When the direction ahead is unclear or uncertain, it is worth returning to this perennial truth so clearly understood by Edmund; providence is our inheritance. The legacy of Edmund Rice is God's gift to the Church, not ours. God will ensure that his plan for that gift will be fulfilled. Our task, our challenge is to reflect, listen and pray so that we may follow the promptings of God's Spirit. Those promptings also lead us in the same direction as God's will for the particular gift he gave to the Church in the life of Edmund Ignatius Rice, but the problem is, we do not always follow.

This prompts us to ask: what might Edmund Rice himself have indicated to us as sources of new life for the family of brothers and this network that has been born and continues to flourish as a result of his life and work?

What we can say with certainty is that, like you and me, Edmund lived in a moment of great challenge and change. As he said, in his own words, "The world and everything in it is continually changing ... Perfect happiness is not to be expected in this world but in another world." Note he is careful to say 'perfect' happiness is not to be expected in this world. The 'complete' joy that Jesus came to bring is never complete in this world, but it is already present. If we trust in God's providence, as Edmund suggests, we can catch a glimpse in this world of the 'perfect' joy that lies ahead for us in the world to come. Indeed one of the characteristics of a Christian life, rooted in the providence of God, is joy. It is a joy that is present even in the midst of the greatest turmoil, uncertainty or setback. It is different, deeper and more complete, than any other joy we can experience on earth.

Edmund knew this joy; his brothers knew this joy. Indeed it was this joy of Christian brotherhood that so often drew young men to give up the financial benefits of a career, the joy and intimacy of marriage and children, and the freedom to pursue one's own will in life, by becoming members of the Irish Christian and Presentation Brothers. I have no doubt this joy of Christian fraternity and selfless service of others is one of the characteristics of the Brothers of Edmund Rice that has inspired your own membership of this International Edmund Rice network. Christian joy is contagious. It bears fruit in service and communion.

I have no doubt that Edmund would wish all of us to rediscover this joy of Christian communion. I think, like me, he would have been struck by the incredible spirit of joy that was so evident at the recent International Eucharistic Congress in Dublin. The theme of the Congress you will recall was 'Communion with Christ and with one another'. When we live that communion, one of its many fruits is joy. You only had to walk around the campus of the RDS during the Congress to realise just how true this is. There was an almost tangible spirit of generosity, communion and joy everywhere you went. It suggested to me that beneath the hurt, anger and disillusionment of recent years, there is still a deep yearning in our country for all that is best in the Catholic faith lived well. Only last week at the RDS I heard that one of the staff there said: "I wish there was a Eucharistic Congress every year, because it brought such joy".

I think at the Congress we caught a glimpse of the silent majority in Ireland who are quietly concerned that their faith, and many of the positive things that Christianity contributed to this nation in the past, are being so easily set aside or undervalued. This includes the enormous contribution of outstanding Irish women and men like Edmund Rice, Nano Nagle, Margaret Aylward and Catherine McAuley. By any standard they are giants of generosity, selflessness, service of our nation and concern for the poor. They were women and men who, motivated by Christian compassion and faith, gave up everything to put in place the very foundations of the freedom, educational excellence and respect as an independent nation that this country now enjoys.

Their contribution deserves proper recognition and honour. It was profound and decisive for this country at a critical moment in its history. In justice, while the dramatic failings of some must be fully acknowledged and addressed, they should not devalue or erase from our nation's gratitude and memory the immense contribution of the thousands of Christian Brothers, Presentation Brothers and Presentation Sisters, Holy Faith Sisters, Mercy Sisters and so many others who, as witnesses to Christian selflessness and service, were also, and continue to be, outstanding ambassadors for Ireland in this country and abroad.

This comes home to me time and time again when I meet people from all across the world who were taught by religious and priests from Ireland. The gratitude and respect they have for these sons and daughters of Ireland are such that just to say you are from Ireland is enough to ensure a warm welcome and immediate recognition as a friend. It is impossible to put a value on this in terms of our international reputation as a nation. I remember, for example, when I travelled to Calcutta in 1997 for the funeral of Mother, now Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, I remember the extraordinary welcome I received from the pupils and staff at the Christian Brothers' school I visited there. They came from a wide variety of social and religious backgrounds. I remember the tremendous atmosphere of mutual respect and care for the individual that was so evident in the school. I remember the tangible spirit of joy. We export many things from this country but few are so appreciated by others, or bring such great return to our reputation as a nation, as the lay and religious missionaries from Ireland who selflessly serve others in Christ's name across the world.

Blessed Edmund famously said that, 'Were we to know the merit of only going from one street to another to serve a neighbour for the love of God, we would prize it more than silver or gold.' Here was a man who understood the value of Christian charity, not just for the individual, but for society. Here was a man who was able to look around and be moved into action by the terrible social and educational inequalities of his day. Here was a man who could see that knowing Christ by meditating on the Scriptures, not least through the mysteries of the Rosary and receiving our Lord worthily in the Eucharist, were vital to unlocking our energy for the selfless service of others, particularly in the great corporal works of mercy and in Catholic education. He understood that for the Christian, social action and concern for the rights and dignity of others flowed from faith and from our personal closeness to Christ in prayer. He understood that cut off from Christ we can do nothing! When we have the heart of Jesus, however, when we know the depth of his love and care in our hearts and can see what hope that love holds for the world, then we are motivated to give up all to make that love visible to the world in the selfless service of others.

That is why in 19th century Ireland, women and men like Edmund Rice, Nano Nagle, Catherine McAuley and Margaret Alyward were not just great social and educational liberators. They were heralds of hope and artisans of a new vision of society, rooted in the values of love, justice and the dignity of every person. This vision, and this hope, flowed directly from their personal experience of Christ for they were not solely concerned with social improvement, development of talent, or material progress for

those young people and others whom they served. They understood that these are the goods that flow to others and to society as a whole from Christian faith. Blessed Edmund wanted to lead young people, and others, to a personal encounter with Christ which, in the words of Pope Benedict, 'gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction' (DCE, n.1). He wanted to strengthen religious faith, encourage hope for heaven and fan the flames of Christian love. He understood that if he could help young people, in particular, to know Christ in their minds and hearts, they would have a gift that would sustain them for life.

I believe Edmund would see, in the recent Eucharistic Congress in Dublin, a great thirst for meaning and an engagement with the deeper questions of life. He would have been spurred into action by the crowds of people turned away from so many of the talks at the Congress because there simply wasn't enough room. I think he would have been moved by the numbers of young people who showed a deep desire for prayer and reflection at the events of the Congress and, more recently, at the youth festival in Clonmacnoise.

Perhaps, out of the dramatic decline in our economy, a new openness and approach to the purpose and meaning, offered by religious faith, is emerging. No one imagines or desires a return to all the forms of religious influence and expression of the past. And yet, there is certainly a growing desire for serious engagement with the social, ethical and transcendent dimensions of religious faith that were so valued by Irish people for generations. I think many more people than is generally realised, believe we are at risk of losing something important in the tendency to marginalise religious faith and Catholicism, in particular from public life and discourse in Ireland. I believe Edmund Rice would also be deeply concerned about this. He would certainly be anxious to find new ways of responding to the thirst for meaning and faith so evident at the Eucharistic Congress. I think he would encourage us not to hide our light under a bushel but to engage constructively with others in the debate about the values that should shape our future as a country.

I am sure he would have been particularly impressed by the number of young people who put up displays and stood at stands every day at the Eucharistic Congress promoting the values of chastity, dignity and respect in relationships. He would have been inspired by the number of young people and adults who were involved in promoting faithful marriage between a father and a mother as the most favourable environment for parenting children and as an institution that flows logically and specifically from our sexual complementarity as women and men. I believe he would have been encouraged by the number of young people at the Congress who, with compassion, sensitivity and deep conviction, explained why human life should be protected and respected in our laws from the first moment of conception through to natural death. These may be young people holding views that get little public recognition but they are views held with deep conviction and with growing clarity and logic by a very significant number of people across this island of Ireland. I think they are views that Edmund Rice would share and be anxious to encourage and promote.

The debate about these issues is about to intensify in our country over coming months. It is important that we all have the courage to make our voices heard. It is important that we do justice to the logic and human reason behind the values we hold. They cannot be relegated to the realm of private religious beliefs with no place in our

laws or public policy in the name of secularism or tolerance. These values are rooted in human reason and available to all. They have the same right to be heard, promoted and respected in our laws and to be put to the people in democratic decisions as other, perhaps less representative views.

It is therefore important as a Church that we prepare with others to defend the equal right to life of a mother and child against any effort to introduce abortion to a country which is one of the safest places in the world for mothers who are expecting a child. The recent judgement of the European Court of Human Rights on A,B & C vs. Ireland did not oblige the Irish Government to legislate for any form of abortion in Ireland. I believe any attempt to do so, even by way of a Ministerial directive, will be vigorously and comprehensively opposed by many.

Edmund Rice and the other great heroes of social equality and change of 19th century Ireland would not be slow to remind us, I imagine, that the continuing gap between the rich and poor in our country and in our world remains one of the most urgent and important issue of justice and human rights of our times.

I think they would also look with increasing alarm at the growing threat to religious freedom across the world, including in many western democracies. Christians, in particular, are experiencing an increasing number of direct attacks on places of worship, on their right to worship and their right to have institutions that reflect and promote their values and ethos. Edmund Rice would wonder why this issue is not being pursued with greater determination by more people in Ireland, not least when it is often Irish Christian missionaries across the world who are, and have been, at the forefront of defending the rights and dignity of those most in need.

Judging by his own attitude to adversity, I have no doubt that Edmund would tell us to avoid the temptation to be discouraged by the painful purification that the Church in Ireland has gone through in recent years. Acknowledging our failures is a painful but necessary part of renewal and rebirth. I think Edmund Rice would point to those things which, in God's providence, the Church sets before us today as the key sources of renewal and future hope. He would certainly point us to the lessons to be learnt from the recent Eucharistic Congress. I think he would also point us to the rich treasures of the Second Vatican Council fifty years after it opened. He would also encourage us to read again the main documents of that Council. He would draw our attention to the Catechism of the Catholic Church as a rich, and largely untapped, resource in the Catholic Church in Ireland. Twenty years after its promulgation, it offers a definitive lens through which to interpret the Second Vatican Council. I think he would also encourage us to reflect deeply on the Year of Faith beginning in October. In particular, I think he would encourage us and the family of his brothers and networks to look at the challenge the Holy Father and the forthcoming Synod of Bishops in Rome will set before us in the New Evangelisation.

Edmund Rice was a man who reflected on the Scriptures at length. He adopted an approach to the spiritual life particularly suited to the active life of business. We live

in a time when the business world in particular needs to be shown how to promote models of business and economic growth in which profit serves the dignity and development of the person and the common good.

So, as you continue to reflect on the theme, Edmund Rice today: what is being born?, I would encourage you to reflect on how you, as the inheritors of this legacy of Edmund Ignatius Rice, might contribute to the new Evangelisation of the world of business and economics. I urge you to consider what might you be able to do to help form young people for future leadership in business, economics and political life.

Who can bring the leaven of Scripture and the life of God into this essential dimension of building up the civilisation of love?

I recently received an interesting communication from Saint Gallen in Switzerland. It contained an ancient picture which showed Saint Gall and Saint Columbanus with two companions. They were seen rowing across a rather choppy looking Lake Constance en route to Saint Gallen. There they arrived in 612AD, which is 1,400 years ago this year. The caption was apt: 'Now as then the Evangelisation of Europe is paramount.'

Saint Gall arrived in Saint Gallen 1,150 years before the birth of Edmund Ignatius Rice. In 1762AD the evangelisation of Ireland was paramount. In opening this Edmund Rice summer school I have no hesitation in saying to you that today, 250 years later, that evangelisation is still paramount. I hope your time together will help you to discern more clearly how the great family that has been born from the faith and heroic zeal of Edmund Ignatius Rice, can now play its part in the New Evangelisation that lies ahead.

Live Jesus in our hearts – for ever!